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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: JAM FREEZE ENTERS "PHASE OF DOCTRINAL AND
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT" UNTIL AUGUST 16

REF: A. 07 BAGHDAD 3242 (SADR'S CEASEFIRE)
[1](#)B. 07 BAGHDAD 3375 (SADR-BADR AGREEMENT)
[1](#)C. 07 BAGHDAD 4048 (JAM FREEZE UPDATE)
[1](#)D. BAGHDAD 3961 (IRAQI NATIONAL GATHERING)
[1](#)E. BAGHDAD 239 (SADRIST ON LTSR)

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: After a flurry of mixed public signals regarding the future of his "freeze" on the Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) militia, Muqtada al-Sadr announced a ceasefire extension through August 16 via Sadrism prayer leaders on February 22. At the same time, Sadrism officials appear to have embarked on a PR campaign, presumably aimed at rehabilitating the group's tattered public image in advance of future provincial elections, that seeks to re-spin the Sadrism Trend and JAM as part of a social and religious-based movement focused on public service. A senior Sadrism official even characterized the freeze extension as a "phase of doctrinal and psychological development." The freeze extension order reportedly sparked anger and dismay in some Sadrism circles (evidenced by a rocket attack on the International Zone the day after the announcement) and will likely further and possibly accelerate the movement's fragmentation. Slightly more than six months after the initial freeze took effect, the Sadr movement is divided, uncertain, and defensive in the face of what many of its members see as a concerted siege by the GOI, ISCI/Badr, and the U.S. Not only have JAM Special Groups continued to operate outside Muqtada's control, he has offered his close supporters mixed signals on whether he will lead a political movement into upcoming elections that many Sadrists believe will confirm the Sadrism Trend's legitimacy as the true voice of Iraq's Shia masses. In this leadership vacuum (exacerbated by Muqtada's extended absences from Iraq), alternative groupings are making plays to assume the mantle of Sadr's father, some of them claiming a different attitude toward the Iraqi constitution, the democratic process, and even the Coalition presence. Whether they can successfully do this remains very uncertain, but the situation may offer some opportunity for the USG and GOI to reach out to Sadr-dominated communities and develop a new sort of relationship with them. End Summary.

Sadr's Sermon: Thanks for Your Service, Keep to the Freeze

[1](#)2. (C) Sadr's JAM freeze extension order came after a flurry of mixed signals from Sadrism mouthpiece Salah al-Obaidi, mounting speculation about the freeze among non-Sadrism Iraqis, and, reportedly, considerable clamor from many JAM circles for an end to the cease-fire and a return to sanctioned violence. Sadr had ample grounds for justifying an end to the freeze had he so chosen. After all, Sadrists have been alleging since last October that the GOI and ISCI/Badr (with USG/Coalition complicity and assistance)

demonstrated bad faith by using the freeze as an opportunity to illegally arrest and kill JAM elements throughout south-central Iraq, particularly in Karbala, Qadisiyah, and Dhi Qar. To a far lesser extent, Sadrists cited periodic Coalition raids into Sadr City as a pretext to cancel the freeze. Pressure within Sadr ranks for cease-fire termination grew to the extent that Sadr felt compelled to re-assert his authority in a December 2 statement in which he counseled patience and continuation of the freeze "until Almighty God wills otherwise."

¶3. (C) Staying with overtly religious trappings to reinforce the religious nature of his movement and infuse his message with religious legitimacy, Sadr's February 22 four-page freeze extension order was delivered as part of a sermon read by prayer leaders in Sadrism-controlled mosques throughout Iraq. The text of the sermon was addressed directly to JAM members and was replete with Islamic symbols and calls for divine blessings, all expressed in rhythmic sentences. Almost as an ending afterthought, Sadr stated he had extended the freeze until August 16 and offered JAM soldiers his "thanks and appreciation for your understanding and your patience and your Jihad and the continuation of your resistance against Godlessness and infidels, and for your love of Islam and the faithful and Iraq and Iraqis." Moving from Thuggery to Theology?

¶4. (C) The announcement of the freeze extension has been accompanied by an apparent Sadrism campaign to further repair the Trend's ragged public image by recycling the long-standing spin that the Trend and JAM are social/religious entities devoted to Islam and public service. A senior Trend official confirmed to London-based "Al-Zaman" and "Le Figaro" newspapers that Sadr is furthering

his Islamic studies in Qom, a development that a senior aide to ISCI chieftain Abdel Aziz al-Hakim told us is particularly worrisome to ISCI because it threatens to bestow fatwa-issuing authority and an aura of religious legitimacy that Sadr currently lacks. Sadrism official and Karbala Deputy Governor Jawad al-Hasnawi told us the Trend is evolving from an organization focused on armed resistance against "the occupation" into an Islam-based social organization that delivers public services. Though Sadrists will defend themselves if attacked, he continued, they favor public protests and general strikes over violence as a method of resistance. This tracks with recent public statements by Sadrism spokesman Salah al-Obaidi, who stated that the Trend is "passing through the stage of political resistance after its involvement in an armed resistance." Liwa Sumaysim, former GOI Tourism Minister and head of the Trend's political committee, told the Iraq press that while the first six-month freeze was a "phase of obedience" for the JAM, the six-month extension marks "the phase of doctrinal and psychological development." We note that the Sadrism attempt to re-cast JAM in this manner is eerily reminiscent of the PR efforts of rival ISCI to dress up its Badr militia as a "social and political organization."

Effects of Freeze

¶5. (S) If the past six-month freeze period was indeed a "phase of obedience" in which Muqtada and his top lieutenants assessed JAM loyalty through adherence to the freeze order, all reports indicate that the Sadrism movement has experienced turmoil and fragmentation through the estrangement or expulsion of disobedient elements since the freeze went into effect last August. Furthermore, the anger and dismay with which the freeze announcement was reportedly received in some Sadrism circles indicates that further fragmentation will likely occur in the coming months, both among political Sadrists and among JAM/armed gangs. For example, one-time senior political Sadrism Adnan Shahmani broke with the Trend to form the Iraqi National Gathering as a rival movement with claims to reject violence and carry forth the teachings of Muqtada's late father Muhammad Sadiq

al-Sadr (Ref D). It remains uncertain, however, whether this entity will attract either a significant number of disaffected Sadrists or anything like a popular following. Sadrist official Jawad al-Hasnawi predicted more such splintering as the Trend prepares election slates that will inevitably alienate some Sadrists who are not proposed as candidates.

¶16. (S) Among armed elements, the freeze has made clear that all of those who purport to act in Sadr's name are not necessarily under the operational control of Sadr and his top commanders. With Sadr reportedly out of Iraq for extended periods, reporting suggests that some of his nominal followers are developing independent power centers of their own, particularly in the provinces. For example, JAM leadership in Basrah is increasingly fractured and hence ineffective in controlling the various factions within its ranks, as best evidenced by the inability of Sadrist/JAM leaders in Basrah to effect the release of CBS journalist Richard Butler from a JAM splinter group, if in fact the release effort was sincere. In spite of continuing announcements by Salah al-Obaidi and other senior Sadrists that those who violate the freeze order are no longer part of the Sadr movement, renegade Special Groups and splinter groups continue to disregard the ceasefire (perhaps most frequently in Basrah and some neighborhoods of Baghdad) by attacking Coalition Forces, Iraqi Security Forces, and Iraqi civilians. Some observers maintain these groups seek to provoke the Coalition into an over-reaction that would galvanize and unify groups into concerted resistance against "the occupation," a response that the GOI's JAM crackdown has thus far failed to generate.

¶17. (S) While the freeze may not fully display the Sadrists as men of peace - an image they may not wear comfortably in any event - it does have public relations benefits for the movement. It permits the Sadrists to continue to rehabilitate the group's public image that was badly tarnished by the August 2007 assault on Karbala's sacred Hussein and Abbas shrines during the Shia Shabaniyah commemoration. The freeze also provides the Sadrists cover to claim that they are not the aggressors in any altercation in which they are involved. Ongoing bad blood between the Sadrists and ISCI/Badr (the Sadrists insist that the mutual non-aggression pact signed by Sadr and Hakim last October is null and void due to alleged ISCI/Badr transgressions) all but ensures that even freeze-abiding JAM elements may be involved in such altercations.

¶18. (S) These latter points are important as the Trend, ISCI, and other Shia parties gear up for provincial elections, currently contemplated to be finished by October 1 thanks to the efforts of the Trend's CoR bloc to insert an election date in the since-vetoed Provincial Powers Law, that will decide local control of the Shia heartland and go far in determining whether the area remains divided into nine provinces or consolidated into one or more regions. The Sadrists boycotted 2005 provincial elections, a move they came to recognize as a mistake not to be repeated. Trend officials express confidence (tempered by conviction that ISCI will try to manipulate the election process) that their grass-roots following in Baghdad and south/central Iraq can be mobilized to ensure convincing Sadrist wins that will unmask ISCI and Dawa as hollow parties that lack a popular base. However, Muqtada's commitment to such elections remains uncertain. PRT reporting suggests that the general assumption in south/central Iraq is that the ceasefire will not prevent the Sadrists from using violence and intimidation to achieve electoral success, although JAM activity will be calibrated to avoid a popular backlash. Basrah's Badr leader has already told REO Basrah that Badr is aware of a JAM Special Group "hit list" that targets Badr leaders and potential candidates in the run-up to the elections. We have heard from many sources that the Sadrists will likely also intimidate voters and poll workers during the election.

Comment

19. (S) Sadr's decision to extend the freeze could not have been easy: after all, the freeze has divided his movement, arguably made him appear weak in the face of alleged GOI/Badr aggression, and could have been revoked with at least some justification at any time over the past four months. Indeed, the extension announcement has already been met with criticism and dismay by Sadr's more militant followers. Sadr has shown himself to be an ambivalent militia leader, unhappy with the damage JAM was doing to his image as a religious and social leader and heir to the legacy of his father. Over the past six months, Muqtada has aggressively sought to enforce the freeze in many areas, hoping both to rehabilitate his image and regain control over his fractured organization. To date, the result has been more fracturing than unifying. Not only have Special Groups continued to operate outside his control, he has offered his close supporters mixed signals on whether he will lead a political movement into upcoming elections, even as many of them had assumed elections would finally confirm the Sadrist Trend's legitimacy as the true voice of Iraq's Shia. In coming months, we expect Sadrists to contrast the forbearance and piety of their leader with the corruption and ineffectiveness of elected ISCI and Dawa officials while using the threat of lifting the ceasefire as a form of intimidation. However, the Sadr movement is divided, uncertain, and defensive in the face of what many of its members see as a concerted siege by the GOI, ISCI/Badr, and the U.S. In this leadership vacuum (exacerbated by Muqtada's extended absences from Iraq), alternative groupings are making plays to assume the mantle of Sadr's father, some of them claiming a different attitude toward the Iraqi constitution, the democratic process, and even the Coalition presence. Whether they can successfully do this remains very uncertain, but the situation may offer some opportunity for the Coalition and the GOI to reach out to Sadr-dominated communities and develop a new sort of relationship with them.

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